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ABSTRACT

Mature and relatively less mature learning communities are examined in this paper to uncover the role shared values and vision have played in professional learning community development. It provides an overview of a 5-year, national study examining how professional learning communities within schools are created; a report of findings gathered from principals and teachers in 18 schools after 1 year of implementation of a school vision; and a description of an explanatory framework that describes the main components involved in developing school vision. Results show that incorporating shared leadership, shared vision, collective learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice within the professional learning community is important for student success and school improvement. It is critical to understand that the emergence of a strong, shared vision based on collective values provides the foundation for informed leadership, staff commitment, student success, and sustained school growth. Visionary leadership combined with shared and collaborative strategies provide support for faculty to invest time and effort needed to create the school vision. The information revealed in this paper provides insights for schools as they work to create a shared vision based on collective values for establishing professional learning communities. (Contains 24 references.) (RT)

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The Role of Shared Values and Vision in Creating Professional Learning Communities

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The Role of Shared Values and Vision in Creating
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Developing the capacity of individuals and staffs to engage in meaningful reform and restructuring to benefit students, continues to be the challenge for schools. Dufour and Eaker state: "The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities" (1998, p.xi).

The term professional learning communities (PLCs) has emerged from organizational theory and human relations literature. PLCs are also linked to Senge's (1990) description of a learning organization in which "people continually expand their capacity to create desired results, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free . . ." (p.3). Lieberman describes professional learning communities in an interview with Sparks (1999) as "places in which teachers pursue clear, shared purposes for student learning, engage in collaborative activities to achieve their purposes, and take collective responsibility for students learning" (p. 53).

Cuban (1998) categorizes school reforms as first– or second- order changes. *First-order changes* are those surface changes that improve current practices by more efficient and effective strategies. *Second-order changes* are those that attempt to alter the basic components of organizations, including structures, goals, and roles. The PLC model represents second-order change as reflected by the substantial and profound changes that occur in relationships, culture, roles, norms, communication patterns, and practices.

Yet Schlechty (1990) describes changing the structure of schools as a difficult task. He says, "Social structures are embedded in systems of meaning, value, belief, and knowledge; such systems comprise the culture of an organization. To change an organization's structure, therefore, one must attend not only to rules, roles, and relationships but to systems of beliefs, values, and knowledge as well" (pp.xvi-xvii).

The creation of a school vision, as an integral component of the change process, emerges over time and is based on common values and beliefs. DuFour & Eaker (1998) examine the co-creation of a shared vision and suggest:

> The lack of a compelling vision for public schools continues to be a major obstacle in any effort to improve schools. Until educators can describe the school they are trying to create, it is impossible to develop policies, procedures, or programs that will help make that ideal a reality . . . Building a shared vision is the ongoing, never-ending, daily challenge confronting all who hope to create learning communities (p.64).

Understanding this challenge reinforces the fact that developing a shared vision based on common values varies as widely as the schools themselves. Each school is unique. "There can be no blueprints for change that transfer from one school to the next" (Fullan & Miles, p.92, in Brown, 1995). Sirotnik (1999) and Little (1997) further explain the individuality of each school by suggesting that values are embedded in the day-to-day actions of the school staff resulting in norms that honor and develop the commitment and talents of individuals seeking to improve their learning communities.

Unfortunately, school reform efforts have been generally unsuccessful in providing the leadership, understanding, and motivation needed to empower staff to

create the collective vision based on shared values that align curriculum, instruction, assessment and supporting programs for schools (Fullan, 1995; Guskey & Peterson, 1993; Lindle, 1995/1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Some research suggests that developing PLCs might be the organizational strategy that could make school reform more successful (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine mature and less mature communities of learners to uncover the role shared values and vision has played in professional learning community development. The paper will provide: 1) an overview of a five-year, national study of creating professional learning communities within schools; 2) a report of findings gathered from principals and teachers in 18 schools after one year of implementation; and 3) a description, derived from the study's findings, of an explanatory framework that describes the main components involved in developing school vision.

The following questions were addressed in the study:

1) In an analysis of schools intentionally building professional learning communities, what differentiated the more mature and successful schools in the ability to develop a vision?
2) What organizational framework would assist learning communities as they develop their shared values and vision?

Theoretical Framework

In this study the theoretical framework is based on the work of Hord

(1997). Among the many related definitions of professional learning communities, she focuses on what Astuto and her colleagues (1993) label *as professional communities of learners*, "in which teachers in a school and its administrators seek and share learning and then act on what they learn" (p.1). Hord's theory reflects the work of several researchers (Kleine-Kracht, 1993; Leithwood, Leonard & Sharratt, 1997; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994; Snyder, Acker-Hocevar & Snyder, 1996). Five defining dimensions emerged from Hord's extensive review of the literature, which she defines as:

1. *Shared and supportive leadership*: School administrators participate democratically with teachers sharing power, authority, and decision-making.
2. *Shared values and vision:* Staff share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning and are consistently referenced for the staff's work.
3. *Collective learning and application*: Staff's collective learning and application of the learnings (taking action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs.
4. *Supportive conditions*: School conditions and capacities support the staff's arrangement as a professional learning organization.
5. *Shared personal practice*: Peers review and give feedback on teacher instructional practice in order to increase individual and organizational capacity.

In addition, Hord and other researchers address values and vision. The concept of a learning community embraces shared values and visions that "lead to binding norms of behavior that the staff supports" (Hord, 1997, p.3) in a climate made possible by mutual trust and respect. Sergiovanni (2001) describes schools as "nested

communities," in which collections of people are tied together by common foundational values. These values lead to "commitment to both individual rights and shared responsibilities" (p.88). Furthermore, as reported by Sergiovanni in the 1992 Claremont Graduate School study, common values do exist in schools. The data suggest "that parents, teachers, students, staff and administrators of all ethnicities and classes, value and desire education, honesty, integrity, beauty, care, justice, truth, courage and meaningful hard work" (p. 81).

Thus it is clear that values are generally thought to be important and merit inclusion in schools. However, to define values and determine which ones to include in teaching and learning presents confusing issues. Begley and Johannson (2000) refer to the often-quoted definition of values by Kluckhohn:

> Values are a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action (p.5-6).

Knowing that values are essential for school communities is not enough. There must be an organized or structured mechanism to identify and inculcate desired values. Developing a vision statement is one way to achieve the inclusion of values in the school culture.

There are many ways to develop the vision statement for a school. Yet first, the school must agree on the definition of vision. For this paper the definition is guided by Evans (1996). In his discussion of vision, he admits the traditional view of vision, i.e. "Vision is seen as a product of rational planning, as deriving from a careful appraisal of the external environment" (p.200), is generally not what happens in schools. Evans

suggests that successful leaders usually have a mental model of their vision and use intuition, creativity, and charisma to enthusiastically engage teachers in developing and adopting the "real" school vision. Furthermore, administrators who do not have a focus for improvement have difficulty in leading their staff in productive decision-making related to helping students or otherwise improving the school. Instead, their efforts are fragmented and driven by urgency rather than a collaborative strategic process.

Writing the vision can be time consuming and challenging. Evans reports there are four common failings of these types of vision statements. These failings include: 1) a lengthy vision statement, 2) a statement that is fragmented and without focus, 3) an unrealistic and impractical statement, and 4) a statement that is composed of cliches and catchwords. Finally, he suggests that vision building must include major time commitment by staff, outstanding leadership and facilitation skills, and a clearly focused agenda.

Methods

The research for this paper is based on the second round of data collection in a five-year project studying professional learning communities, sponsored by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), Austin, Texas. Research from the first year was extensively reported last year at the 2000 AERA conference.

To address research questions in the study, the principal and a teacher leader from each of 18 school sites involved in the study were interviewed by Co-Developers. Co-Developers are educators who participated in the research and writing for the SEDL project. The 18 schools, located primarily in the southwest United States, also represent the Southeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest regions of the nation. The schools included

elementary, middle, and high school grade levels, as well as diverse economic factors and demographic characteristics.

Each interview was audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed by the Co-Developers using the five dimensions of professional learning communities as a framework for examination. Incorporating a holistic approach, the schools were placed in clusters on a continuum representing established-to-less-established professional learning communities. The data were then analyzed by the Co-Developers using inter-rater reliability techniques to distinguish between and among the clusters. The school characteristics were studied in detail in order to collapse them into phases of development that would differentiate schools that appeared to be more or less mature in the development of professional learning communities. Major phases of development were identified using the characteristics that emerged during the earlier analysis, and then the phases were organized into an operational model to describe the continuum. A final analysis of the shared values and vision dimension resulted in the development of the components of the organizational framework.

Findings

Data in this study uncover a contrast between schools that reflected more mature professional learning communities as compared to those less mature. Although the majority of the schools did not have highly developed learning communities, there were seven schools that demonstrated mature professional learning communities as reported in their responses to the five dimensions of Hord's (1997) model.

While the five dimensions are interdependent and related in actual practice, individual analysis of the dimensions was possible. This analysis contributed to the

discovery and development of an organizational framework to better understand the evolution of shared values and vision. The framework (see Figure 1) includes four components. These components are: Why do Schools Develop a Vision?; 2) What is the Purpose of the Vision?; 3) Who is Responsible for Developing the Vision?; and 4) How Does the School Develop the Vision? The following information examines the findings by providing examples of the four framework components.

Component One: Why Do Schools Develop a Vision?

Findings indicated that the overarching reason for developing a vision centers on how the school can support students. As teachers and administrators talked about student issues, they referred to "academic focus" or "reading and writing." Often the interaction included references to the "welfare of children" or "providing students a safe environment." A principal and Co-Developer reported, "The key ingredient is kids. Making things better for students to achieve and become true learners."

While student concerns dominated the reasons for developing a vision, other concerns included raising test scores, demographic concerns, change issues and the importance of lifelong learning

One superintendent, also a Co-Developer, who noted the importance of commitment to change by the school board, illustrates an example of change issues:

> The school board president pledged his support and felt I should pursue my interest in this project. Later, this project and the process were shared with the full board at a regularly scheduled meeting. Board members expressed their interest in the district's participation in this project and the benefits for the student, school, and the district in this endeavor.

Another concern centered on a consideration of the future learning of the student. An elementary principal explained:

> Teachers now feel excited about what the children are linking together. They're beginning to express concerns such as, 'what will happen to our children after they leave here?' . . . The teachers want our children to continue to love reading.

They don't want to see their vision and hard work die . . . They are asking how to make change happen so that the good things will continue to happen for children.

While the majority of the 18 schools would recognize the importance of having a vision, there were a few schools that just didn't get around to talking about vision. One principal admits, "Well, if it's [vision] left up to me as it has been for years, I'm not going to get it done. There are other things more pressing that I need to get done."

In states where the high stakes testing demanded strict accountability of schools and administrators, often the vision became the press to achieve high scores. An elementary teacher voiced frustration: "The [state] test drives teaching and student performance. The shared vision and involvement is primarily in the administration. This at times affects instructional programs and increased commitment."

Component Two: What is the Purpose of the Vision?

In analyzing this component two areas emerged. One area focused on the importance of interpersonal skills such as the development of trust, respect, and self-esteem. In one of the less mature schools a district administrator observed that the faculty had not internalized the shared vision. She suggested that one of the reasons for this was the previous administration's lack of trust in teachers and absence of a clear vision.

A teacher in a more mature school expressed the importance of trust and communication: "We are involved in three projects that take complete cooperation and complete trust and communication. We model activities that are necessary to build trust within the staff. People are brought into this circle of honest conversation." Even though

some schools have been successful in developing the needed trust, others are still struggling to find ways that work for them. A teacher expressed the challenge this way:

> We are very focused on students and that is a shared vision. We are all different and we accept that in working together. We are breaking the paradigms of traditional schools. We are slowly getting to the point where we can trust each other and know your next-door neighbor really has the best interests of the student in mind. We have a school mission that we developed collectively last year. Everyone plugs into it and works together.

The other area focused on specific content related areas such as reading, technology, or integrated academic programs. A Co-Developer documented one example of identifying specific academic areas:

> I meet with every academic team during their planning time. The need to identify a school wide issue was used as the topic of discussion. . . . As the topics were introduced . . . I made the case for the idea that technology could easily be used to address the vocational skills area.

Several more mature schools designed the vision to incorporate a broad academic approach to student growth. A teacher recounted the purpose of the vision:

> Our shared vision is focused toward student learning and achievement. Everyone is working together to help students. The lines of subject area have been erased, and the teachers are collaborating to discuss content outside of the realm of their subject matter.

Consideration of all the needs of the students and providing a more balanced approach to learning was described by a principal: "We do have a staff that is highly

committed to student academic success. Our staff truly values successful learning and developing the whole child."

Component Three: Who is Responsible for Developing the Vision?

There was a great deal of variance in the participation of stakeholders at the sites. However, the schools that were more mature included all of the stakeholders – district personnel, parents and community members, faculty and staff, and in some cases students - in the development of the vision. A Co-Developer reported:

> We have a school vision, made up by teachers, parents, and the community. This is redone every three years. So we have an operating vision of instruction, or the way it should look. The budget and grants are all based around this vision. You would be surprised at how much you can accomplish in three years if you have it in writing.

However, some less mature schools were struggling with the involvement of the entire faculty. A middle school teacher reported: "We have not gotten all faculty interested in a 'shared vision' to date. We have gotten all sixth grade teachers and special educational instructors to be together, discuss, and act on shared problems. We have begun."

The other factor noted in this component is how the stakeholders were represented in the vision development process. Some schools had a representative system in which the campus leadership team formulated the vision, while other schools had a more direct involvement by the stakeholders. An example of total faculty involvement is expressed in this Co-Developer's account:

> [The principal] is very clear that she wants teachers to feel that this is a great place to work, that there is open communication, and that the faculty and staff have total support . . . .She stated that she 'did not want to push [the staff] into programs or ways of being, but that she prefers to let them develop the true vision of the school.

Begley (1999) characterizes this involvement by describing it as an onion. At the center of the onion is the individual. The next ring includes groups such as peers, friends, and professional colleagues. The third ring is the organization, and the fourth ring is the greater cultural community or society. He explains that each of the rings represents not only a source for values, but also a source of conflicts about those values. Placing the individual at the center of the onion emphasizes that the individual is the catalyst for growth and development in our organizations. Thus individual involvement in vision setting is critical for understanding, commitment, and follow-through.

Another issue is district involvement in setting priorities and providing support for innovations. A Co-Developer who is also a district administrator explained the interaction:

> The primary concern of those who had been involved in the district was that of time and energy. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the project concept was of value to the district. The main concern was if the project fit into the district focus at the time, and if it did, would it receive the necessary commitment from those involved.

Component Four: How Does the School Develop the Vision?

This process-oriented question uncovered a wide range of procedures that contributed to varying levels of success in developing the vision. More established communities used a comprehensive linear approach to developing the vision that incorporated staff development sessions, multi-leveled discussions, regularly scheduled meetings, and a timeline that offered adequate time for consideration, reflection, and revisiting of the major areas and concerns. Other schools asked facilitators or external change agents to direct a process that clarified values, visions, and strategies. Some schools used their campus leadership teams to develop the vision and then present the information to the larger faculty. One school used a more dramatic approach in designing the strategic planning for the campus. The 'Search Conference' designed by Weisbord and Janoff (1995) was used to "revisit" the vision developed several years ago. The principal wanted the new staff members to have the opportunity for input and to develop commitment to the school vision and purpose.

Fullan (1991) maintains that in a realistic school setting the formal linear approach to vision development is still limited. He believes the process is so complex and sophisticated that it is beyond the capacities of most school organizations.

Another aspect of how a school develops vision is related to consideration of values. The discussion of values emerged in this component as noted by a Co-Developer:

> From our processing, the faculty's values came forward – all children learning and a focus on literacy. The teachers had worked together so long that it was hard to put some things aside. The staff was so used to leading themselves and they had begun to let personal values lead them instead of shared values.

Consequently, this faculty benefited from the vision process that in turn positively affected the students:

> This year, the 'learning for all' mission is seen in the caring of everyone at the school for the children . . . children are treated with respect . . . parents seem to know that their children will be safe and cared for at the school. . . .One sees adults talking to children in quiet, calm voices. Children's needs are met, whether it be a warm coat or a warm hug.

While many schools used processes that clearly defined the values and vision other schools faced barriers that served as a catalyst to initiate the process. One teacher lamented:

> We want what is best for the kids, but we don't share a common vision of how to get to that point. We have a mission statement, but as far as all of us being on the same page, we aren't. Teachers see themselves as autonomous units.

Some of the schools that were not as developed in their procedures often resorted to using the district's vision, which then became their "focus" or "vision" for the year. These schools unfortunately would bounce from one innovation or program to another, which resulted in fragmentation of efforts and lack of commitment by teachers and administrators. A principal described it this way:

> Not all of the team has a complete commitment to the task. We are working on drawing in others to bring them into the fold. By meeting with team members on a regular basis and working with their suggestions we hope to develop the shared vision.

Educational Importance of the Study

Incorporating all dimensions (shared leadership, shared vision, collective learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice) of the professional learning community is important for student success and school improvement. The dimensions are intricately related and often overlapping. It is critical, however, to understand that the emergence of a strong, shared vision based on collective values provides the foundation for informed leadership, staff commitment, student success, and sustained school growth. Current data reveal characteristics of more mature and less mature professional learning communities as they struggle to achieve their goals. Hallinger & Heck (1996, in Davis) conclude the most significant effect on student learning comes through the principal's efforts to establish a vision of the school and to develop goals related to the accomplishment of the vision. Visionary leadership combined with shared and collaborative strategies provide support for faculty to invest the time and effort needed to create the school vision.

The information revealed in this paper provides insights for schools as they work to create a shared vision based on collective values for establishing professional learning communities. In addition, examples of more successful schools are included for emerging professional learning communities to study and consider. The paper also describes an organizational framework for school leaders as they organize, develop, and maintain the vision. Continued research on vision and professional learning communities will be reported next year based on the analysis of data collected during the second and third years of the research project.

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